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# In the Field:

## Larry McMurtry and Archer City, Texas

by Leigh Holmes

Every so often it is a worthwhile endeavor for academics to get out of the office and into the country. Like an overly helpful St. Bernard with library card attached to collar, an academic in the field sets up a kind of portable museum; this narrative is about a trip taken to Larry McMurtry's Archer City, Texas hometown, to work with both a museum's perspectives and a collection of memories from the novels set there. Cities like Venice, Italy are said to be open air museums. In goodly St. Bernard fashion, I propose that we explore how the principle of the open air museum works in Archer City.

Sometime about an hour after leaving the house in Lawton, we are a few miles to the south of Wichita Falls, Highway 79, which junctions off Highway 281 and takes us west to Archer City. Although there is nearby Thalia, which is also the name of a town in McMurtry's novels about this area, Archer City is primarily the material and the spiritual home (an oxymoron?), the place where *The Last Picture Show* was filmed in 1971 by Peter Bogdanovich and others whose film careers jumped afterward (Busby 21).

Having been previously aided visually in our knowledge of the area since both wife and I saw the *TLPS* and read the novel, the scenery of the 17 mile drive on Highway 79 puts us pretty much in touch with what we remember it looking like. During the ride, we see oil wells, some pumping, some two and three times as tall as a man, others looking very small.

The cattle we pass mostly stare at fences. Upon the sides of the highway sit scattered drilling pipes

and rusty pieces of maintenance equipment. Small, light-colored frame houses fly past, as do brick mansions sitting far off the road.

Sometime back in Texas history, there seemed to be a wide-reaching agreement not to push zoning ordinances, not to come up with master township plans and not to regulate much of anything. Part of the physical aura of Texas and western Oklahoma comprises a version of the national helter skelter, with an oil well here, a mansion there, here a shack, there a shopping center: McMurtry Americana. The crazy-quilt whizzes by. Long an area person, raised in other regions of North America, I halfway work on a feeling of local pride.

Downtown Archer City consists mainly of a city square, with the Archer County Courthouse in the middle of the town and situated in a shaded, grassy area. There are permanent stone benches and large and accommodative picnic tables in front. Hauling a cooler, we find what may soon be a little shade. Sitting, we sip at cold drinks and eat lunch.

There is a long marble stone memorial monument near us. We gaze at it. "The World War Two veterans have their names going alphabetically toward the middle," Wife says. I observe the names of many hundreds of veterans.

The monument alerts us to the fact that these people of the area are real people, many of them quite private in their individual lives, not necessarily the representational characters of McMurtry's fiction, the latter being characters

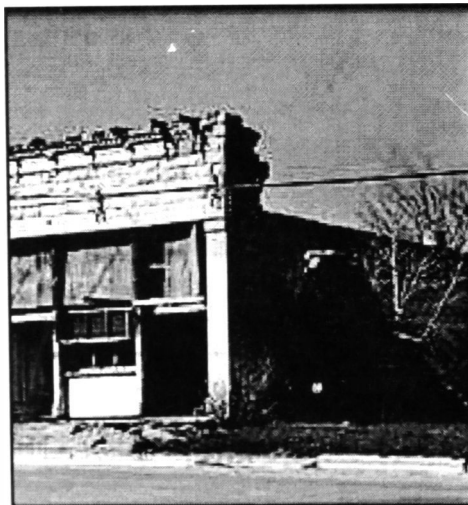


Photo courtesy ABCNews.com

whom we will re-imagine later, when we get over to Archer City High School.

Looking at the tourists, two large law officers walk by, smile, wave, and go into the court house.

McMurtry's grandparents moved to this area in 1887 (ING 145). After having lived in D.C. and Los Angeles, McMurtry himself seems to have been brought back here by the important associations of the place. Perhaps he was brought back by the people, perhaps by the city's size, with one cafe and one Dairy Queen. Maybe it was by its tranquility. Possibly the prospects of staying here offer a kind of moral grittiness, of toughing it rather than floating in some place in which many other fashionable people reside.

We finish our sandwiches and begin the consumption phase of our trip, pleasurable book browsing and purchasing.

Archer City's town area includes within the Booked Up complex four buildings that are former stores, a Ford dealership among them (Watson 81). The four buildings now house the books of McMurtry's bookstore, Booked Up. Located in the headquarters store, Building 1, to the left of the entrance, in the east part of the front area, is a working office and a main office with a credit card machine. The front area includes first editions as well as an air conditioner, a sought-after item on this warm day. Behind the windowed front part of the store is a huge warehouse area. Light comes through the angled tilt windows in the back area, and we see shelf upon shelf of books, of literary criticism, literary biography, autobiography, African American writers and miscellaneous literary categories. In a separate, adjacent room to the west are books about Texas, Native American literature, western Americana and genre fiction. Here, Wife parks herself, the room being the coolest save the air-conditioned office, where traffic gets heavy. She is interested in genre fiction.

After finding a copy of the letters of Malcolm Cowley and Kenneth Burke and a book of critical essays on Cynthia Ozick, I have difficulty finding

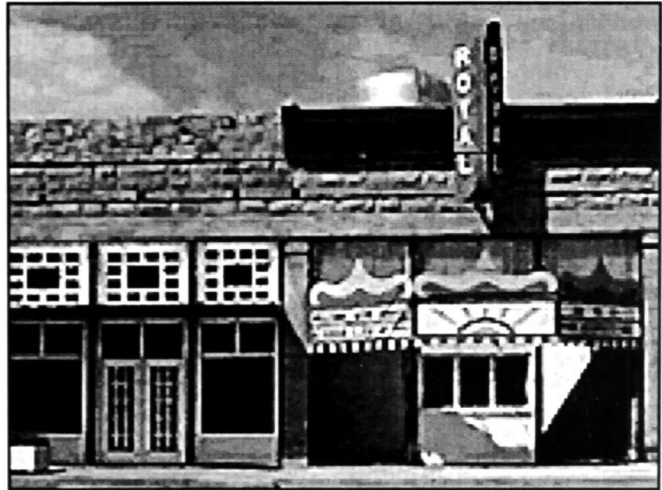


Photo courtesy ABCNews.com

anything by author Maya Angelou. I hope to locate a few autobiographical volumes.

A helpful worker with a Texas accent helps me look for a few minutes but unsuccessfully; then she disappears.

She reappears with McMurtry at her side.

"Angelou's poetry is in the store across the street," McMurtry says in an amiable voice. I say, "Thanks. I'm looking for her autobiographies." This is not the time to discuss *Duane's Depressed*, in whose central character from Archer City and his mid-life crisis I recently experienced a troubling interest.

McMurtry is satisfied that I know where to find things and with his colleague moves to another part of the store.

I continue to peer at a shelf area that I have been working for the last few minutes.

Shortly thereafter I find two autobiographies by Angelou, announce the find to McMurtry and his worker and move to the nearby western Americana and Native American literature area. There I spot N. Scott Momaday's *The Names: A Memoir* and *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. I take the less known but ultimately pleasing *Names* to the cashier. In the office, a seasoned book connoisseur also moves around, owner of several rambunctious yipping dogs.

On the other side of the street from Building 1

are two other stores. One houses art and architecture which we won't have time for today. The other consists of publications about books, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century publications, fiction before 1925, foreign works and translations. At a fourth locale across the street from the courthouse are a few favorite reading subjects —film, drama, linguistics, reference. We amble over there.

Outside, *The Last Picture Show's* deaf Billy still cleans up the street in the imagination. Billy's sense of worth led him to do something that the local economy still cannot easily accommodate. Sweeping the streets in a voluntary effort, Billy provided a natural response to a time of economic decline and movement of people from the town. He was supported by a benefactor, Sam the Lion, and spent time at Sam's declining cafe, pool hall, and picture show. Billy was a friend of Sonny Crawford and Duane Moore, and after Billy's death and Duane's departure from the town for Army duty in Korea, we are told that for Sonny, "It was another one of those mornings when no one was there" (213).

In these later years of reflection, Billy, Sonny, and Duane seem more and more to foreshadow events to come in American life, especially in their 1950's style enactments of powerlessness and isolation in this Texas town. They seem to speak for a larger portion of rural regions, especially the American Plains, some areas suffering severely because of their dependence upon the production of single commodities, like wheat in North Dakota. The benefactors who remain seem to be less effective, given the economies of these smaller communities.

We ask directions on how to get to the high school. Then we head west on Highway 79, passing the Dairy Queen of McMurtry's autobiographical *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen*.

As mentioned, Archer City can be discovered in much the way one discovers an open air museum. Yet a city like Archer City, with literary places and characters redolent in their associations

with historical eras, works as another kind of museum. If the text *Theorizing Museums* could be expanded, we would demonstrate that literary open air cities depend upon readers whose experiences and knowledge comprise a special perspective. A historical perspective enables them to provide what a visitor gets with a museum painting or a display case, and less stylistically, that is, a sense of history. All of us have special periods in our lives. For me, it's the fifties and one or two decades beyond.

Driving north toward a park area and the high school, Archer City in this location has for us the aura of decades, of "then and now" qualities. We take a right turn near a sign indicating the county fair grounds. Coming to the park's area for cars, we stop before some rusty, used looking park equipment. A parking lot rail immediately before us is also rusted, reminiscent of the theme of decline of the town in *The Last Picture Show*.

Someone must surely be able to conceive a simple plan to accommodate the simplest of community needs like painting a rusty parking rail in a small Texas town. The plan might work through volunteers. Billy swept the streets, and the idea



must be out there.

We sit in the car.

Literary cities like Archer City give testimony to the ideas of their authors and activities of their fictional characters who dwell in them. McMurtry dealt with the loss of Archer City's only picture show as a response to a slough of economic forces. A drive through this city gives continuing evidence of these problems. Only so many people can own or operate oil wells.

Driving again, we spot the high school, not far from the park. Literary scholarship, psychology, economics, and sociology are the museum's called-upon disciplines for approaching this building. Archer City High School and the Texhoma world of the fifties through the nineties seems to be emblematic of larger sections of the nation. In the Archer City/Thalia novels, Sonny, Jacy, and Duane experienced the *zeitgeist* of decline and exodus as Jacy shifted her interests from Thalia to Wichita Falls and eventually moved to Dallas in *TLPS*. In *Texasville*, she returned to brood upon a lost world of youth, which, by the time of the novel, the eighties, was sensed as substantial by many youth of the sixties.

The recent novel *Duane's Depressed* antici-

pates the unfolding era's consciousness. Duane's discovered at age 62 that there is a need for good literature, that Henry David Thoreau had thoughtful things to say, and Duane's discoveries are a sign within a more recent consciousness of urban sprawl, abandoned strip malls, and roadside trash. In the novel, Duane Moore desires to leave his pickup permanently parked and to explore the surrounding area by walking and biking along the highways of the area. He becomes disgusted with roadside trash during his long walks.

The world of Thalia/Archer City, its high school and the novels' people of the fifties, the eighties and the nineties, comprises a textual inscription of the culture's developing consciousness.

On this day, Archer City High School offers a surprise. It has solidity and fresh tan color to it, an impressive building. Within that building, the high school's English teacher in *The Last Picture Show* had reminded this reader of the hopefulness for supporters of literature of the fifties, with that era's linkage of formal literary expression to popular culture through television's *Playhouse 90*. In the betrayal of that teacher, the book foreshadowed a shift which had become apparent by the book's publication date of 1966, the separating of literature from popular culture, the removal of English teacher John Cecil in *TLPS* from his place of employment, said removal hastened by interpretations of masculinity attaching to John Cecil's fondness for poetry classics. Yet John Cecil was a person who "managed to keep liking people" and "was always hauling a carload of kids to a fair, a play, a concert" (*TLPS* 32).

Despite the interpretations of formal poetry by some of the people in Thalia, forms of informal poetry began emerging as poetic lyrics merged with music during the sixties. Persons who study poetry have traced and detailed this historic movement.

Driving today away from the school, one sees only a few trees in the neighborhood; a tree-planting campaign sometime would have been nice.



Photo courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society



The museum's question: Did the Archer City novels demonstrate a kind of progress? One of *The Last Picture Show*'s concerns was decline and voicelessness. Having a voice, we find in the later *Duane's Depressed*, requires that a person must do the things that are necessary to locate it.

Voicelessness originates from whomever it is that one sees as important enough to have in a dialogue. For the two earlier Thalia/Archer City novels, the assumed "listeners" seemed to be the artificial worlds of media and film, including the 'B' films Jacy Farrow acted in. For Duane Moore in *Duane's Depressed*, it was a dialogue with self.

Duane Moore in the nineties came to locate a personal voice for all seasons as he began in his isolated cabin to live a lifestyle that went back to Thoreau, a voice of the 1840s. It is a new vision that he might have benefitted from acting upon earlier, bored as he was with running his oil company.

We view as a telling progression the fifties' perspectives offered by Sam the Lion, Jacy, Sonny, Duane, Ruth Popper and Billy; the eighties' Duane and Jacy; and the nineties' new Duane and his relationship with therapy in the form of literature.

Thus from the museum's perspectives, we see the legitimacy of the views of these people of the fifties as they were in the youth of their lives: these insights do not arise from a novel that can be labeled merely regional, implying no broader socio-cultural connections.

The museum's representative is upon the verge of a declaration: The Archer City/Thalia novels move beyond the regional; they offer insights into the patterns of rural American decline and renewal. Our visit here supplies the visible grounds of those insights.

The visit to McMurtry's home city, the town that provides characters and settings for three of his novels, provides compensations, if only in the minds of visitors. When later we drive home, we feel contented about a day of book buying and reflection.

Quixote-like, later, among friends, we spread our pleasure by means of sharing, talking up Archer City and the bookstore and McMurtry's fiction, and the imaginings of an afternoon.



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